

Entering the Year: A School-Based View of the Student Experience at City in Term 1

Executive Summary

The following paper details recommendations from paid focus groups conducted with students in each school at the beginning of October 2020 on their experience of entering this academic year.

From conducting focus group with each school it is clear that each School has delivered significantly different experiences, and as such recommendations have been tailored to the needs of students as they were given, with particular detail paid to school-specific needs.

Respondents included new and returning undergraduates, new and returning postgraduates (taught and research), international, and UK-based students. No demographic data was collected from the focus groups.

Recommendations

This report recommends that each school take into consideration and agree to implement the following items:

School of Maths, Computer Sciences, and Engineering (SMCSE)

1. To organise more networking/employability activities both at school level and course level.
2. Access to facilities:
 - a. To offer clear communications on the expectation and availability of on-site facilities for study, research, and academic use, for both the present time and upcoming terms.
 - b. To offer improved, more regular, and safe access to on-site facilities for research, lab work, and study, for both the present time and upcoming terms.
3. An improved online learning experience:
 - a. To offer more synchronous learning with staff.
 - b. To abandon the use of assessed team projects, or to modify marking in order for varying circumstances to be taken into account in assessed team projects.
 - c. To improve or implement the integration of research centres with other students and researchers in online fora.
 - d. To provide better social and community events via virtual platforms.

School of Arts and Social Sciences (SASS)

1. To organise more social activities both at school level and course level.
2. To increase group activities in class or otherwise encourage students to discuss ideas and collaborate on in-class activities.
3. To schedule and timetable classes and assessments with consideration for International students (and different time-zones within the cohort).
4. Students would like the school to consider the following measures, in case covid-19 safety measures increase:
 - a. To decrease the workload on students in order to reduce screen-time in fully online learning and working environments;
 - b. To increase the provision of remote social contact;
 - c. To improve and expand accommodation-based support tracking and communication the numbers of currently isolating residents, assistance with food delivery, status updates on residence infection numbers, etc.;
 - d. To note that students registered a preference for Zoom over Microsoft Teams.

School of Health Sciences (SHS)

1. To reduce student workloads in order to better balance self-care with study in the home for full-remote learning.
2. Communications:
 - a. To improve the clarity of communications concerning site attendance and activities for the coming terms to alleviate uncertainty and reduce stress.
 - b. To improve the timeliness of communications for both academic and non-academic matters, with students suggesting a minimum 2 weeks', and preferably at least 1 months' notice for academic and non-academic events.
3. Timetabling issues to be addressed:
 - a. To either supply personalised timetables or improve the timeliness of the delivery and the ease-of-use of non-personalised timetables.
 - b. To avoid scheduling clashes, which students reported were common in induction and early term.

- c. To publish timetables earlier in advance of the start of term.
 - d. Related to the above, to bear in mind international students' time-differences and necessary quarantine periods when arriving in the UK when scheduling and distributing timetables.
4. To increase on-site contact learning particularly for students expecting to attend placements in order to better prepare them for the professional environment and offer meaningful practical education.

Business School

1. More job support for PGs and Final Years
2. More social & community events. Higher volume of social communications.
3. To increase number of synchronous teaching hours, improve the quality of remote learning materials, and make better use of available technologies and better develop the implementation of available technologies.
4. Communications to give notice of at least 48 hours and preferably 1 week for any academic and non-academic events to be aware of.
5. To remain open and empower students who wish to attend campus for on-site learning and social activities to be able to do so.

Law School

1. Online experience:
 - a. To rectify poor clarity on the expectations for the school's and students' usage of teams and zoom.
 - b. To improve and supply guidance documents to assist students in the use of online learning platforms.
 - c. To pay make available, in good time, study-necessary resources and support for international students in particular.
2. Timetabling:
 - a. To improve the delivery of timetables and scheduling, offering timetables further in advance of the resumption of teaching in future.
 - b. To ensure that timetables detail clearly, or are accompanied by unambiguous communications which detail, whether classes are expected to be held online, on-site, or in other or mixed formats in good time for students to make necessary arrangements and familiarise themselves with learning platforms.
3. Communications:
 - a. To reduce the disparate nature of current communications, which rely heavily on multiple platforms including email and social media, and centralise important communications for clarity and trust in the school's information dissemination.
 - b. To disseminate communications with a notice of at least 3 days, preferably a week for academic and non-academic items.
4. To provide face-to-face classes or a bespoke remote substitute in areas where co-present skills are considered essential learning and experience, particularly areas such as advocacy and conference skills.

General Commentary from Focus Groups

This section provides an overview of the general commentary from students in each focus group.

SMCSE

In general, uncertainty proved a chief concern amongst SMCSE students, who, as a whole, cited unclear communications, unclear expectations, and poor-to-non-existent support structures in inducting and preparing students for the learning experience as reasons for stress, concerns, discomfort, and dissatisfaction in both the online and on-site learning experience.

Apart from directly addressing communications channels, students felt that increased synchronous learning time and increased social and community events would do a great deal to alleviate these problems by allowing direct and responsive communication between staff, students, and students and their peers. Some specific recommendations have also been included given concerns belonging to students in need of particular lab facilities with particular research needs or assessment needs.

SASS

SASS students generally felt that they were being well-supported in their learning experience and that the school was taking pains to deliver a high-quality education. However, many suggested that, given their courses are heavily reliant on discussion, conversation, and the spontaneity of the seminar environment, more could be done to organise social and community events, and offer stimulating collaborative group activities as part of a remote-learning environment.

Students felt these concerns would be exacerbated in the event of increased pandemic restrictions and therefore voiced requests for reductions in workloads and increases in social and community contact in this eventuality.

SHS

SHS students registered concerns matching both SMCSE and SASS students insofar as they felt the clarity and timeliness of communications could significantly be improved, and they also felt that workloads were placing a heavy burden upon students without addressing the consequent strain on work-life balance in a remote learning and home environment. Especially given the expectation for many SHS students that they will undertake placements in second term and engage in practical study, the establishment of clear expectations for on-site attendance were called for.

Further to these concerns, improvements in the release of timetables and scheduling, as well as more on-site practical study for students expecting to undertake placement were called for.

Business School

Generally, concerns from the Business School were oriented around value-for-money and employability. Where students felt that the online learning experience was insufficient to justify their expenditure, demands were made for an increase in the quality of learning across the board, including increases in synchronous teaching, improvement in the quality and delivery of remote learning resources, and an expectation for the Business School to empower students who chose to do so to attend campus to study.

In addition, students felt that current restrictions cut them off from networking and employability opportunities they may otherwise have taken advantage of, and thus suggested that they would benefit immensely from the school organising substitutes

including social and community networking sessions as well as targeted employability support and professional networking for finalists.

Law

The Law school's problems were mainly centred upon communications, with students reporting many issues in the timeliness, organisation, centralisation, and ease-of-access of information from the school. The general feeling suggested that students would immensely appreciate a centralised communications approach such that essential information was accessible in a set location, and that communications should establish and set expectations, as well as support and offer guidelines for the coming term and the remote learning environment much further in advance than has so far been the case. These issues have been particularly compounded in timetabling issues reported by students.

Further, students felt that a number of the essential skills of their core learning were missing from their experience in advocacy and conferencing skills, which they did not feel were being adequately replicated in remote form.